
This volume offers an intimate look into the organization and transformation of the U.S. branch of the Puerto Rican Socialist Party (PSP), la Seccional, within the 1960–90s period through the eyes of its members and allies and discusses the Movimiento Pro-Independencia (MPI), founded in 1959, which preceded the PSP.

These movements began during the heydays of the Estado Libre Asociado de Puerto Rico (commonwealth) and in the middle of its transformative programs, operations Bootstrap (manos a la obra) and Serenity (serenidad). This was just a few years after the first elected governor of Puerto Rico, Luis Muñoz Marín, asked U.S. President Harry Truman to stop submitting annual reports on Puerto Rico to the United Nations, leading to the international organization’s removal of the island from the list of non-self-governing territories in 1953, which may explain the claim that the PSP sought to “tear down the curtain of silence concealing U.S. colonialism in its Caribbean territory” (p. 3). The context in which the MPI and the PSP emerged may also explain their short-lived existence.

The mission of la Seccional was indeed contradictory. On the one hand, it was parented by the PSP in Puerto Rico, and thus national liberation was its core mission. On the other hand, the movement tried to be part of the U.S. Left and to forge revolutionary alliances and engage in solidarity work. “The PSP asserted that the role of its U.S. Branch [sic] would not be confined to this either/or vision and that it would pursue both goals” (p. 4).

Following the editors’ introduction, there are 15 essays organized in three main parts (histories, testimonies, and coalitions and alliances) and a short conclusion. The historical context in the introduction includes some reductionist statements, asserting, for example, that the Cuban-Filipino-Spanish-American War ended the “short-lived Autonomist Charter granted to Puerto Rico by the Spanish authorities” (p. 6). The Charter, which had a dubious legality, had been suspended by the Spanish governor general, who declared martial law on April 21, 1898, scarcely two months after the inauguration of the autonomic government. Constitutional guarantees were only reinstated on July 17, 1898, as a last-ditch effort to win the loyalty of the Puerto Ricans on the eve of the U.S. invasion.

It is also problematic for Andrés Torres to claim that the ELA co-opted “the impetus toward self-determination by promising social and political reform” (p. 22). The lack of support for independence among rural and urban labor sectors was one of the main factors leading to the ELA. Torres also states as fact that
the U.S. military forces attacked, assassinated, and jailed nationalists, probably referring to the Nationalist Insurrection in 1950. However, the insurrection was put down by the insular police and the Puerto Rico National Guard, not by federal forces.

The editors warn readers about the personal testimonies that constitute the core of the book, asserting that they did not “seek to suppress testimonies that some readers may find problematic (that is, articulations that may come across as hyperbole, rhetoric, dogmatism, or political jargon)” (p. 5). In that same vein, they warn us of “certain testimonies [readers may find] as advocating for supporting leaders, movements, or governments” (p. 5) they consider indefensible. They explain that they did not consider their job to be one of “contesting the memoirs’ conclusions and statements” (p. 5). This is a missed opportunity. The testimonies are valuable primary documents on their own. However, without annotations and clarifications here, their limitations are only known to a small group of specialists.

The book uses primary documents from the ¡Despierta Boricua! History Recovery Project, and the richness of this PSP collection is one of its strengths. Equally useful are the organizational charts showing labor, university, and community nucleus and affiliates. The contributors’ self-reflection on the movement’s shortcomings (caudillismo, machismo, and sexism) is refreshing, but falls short as it doesn’t address changing political realities leading to the movement’s demise.

The editors conclude this volume by wondering whether the many crises affecting Puerto Rico in the twenty-first century and the visible youth mobilization, in particular LGBTQ communities, are the beginning of a conscious new Left. They bet on those seeking full independence and free association, and Movimiento Victoria Ciudadana as the basis of a new alliance leading to sovereignty. The authors of the essays seem hopeful, just the way they were during their formative years, that revolution is still around the corner.

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